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Abstract

The relativistic viewpoint of the sociolinguist emphasizes the fully systematic but different nature of nonstandard dialects. In this paper, the author takes issue with various views that currently enjoy popularity in a number of disciplines but which violate basic linguistic and sociolinguistic premises about the nature of language. These views are often communicated to and adopted by those in a position which directly affects the lives of many ghetto children. Furthermore, these views have a direct bearing on the attitude of both white and black middle class teachers toward Black English. The attitudinal problem towards this intricate and unique language system is probably the biggest problem faced. But there is also a practical reason for understanding some linguistic and sociolinguistic premises about the nature of language with reference to nonstandard dialects. An understanding of systematic differences between nonstandard dialects and standard English must serve as a basis for the most effective teaching of standard English. See related document ED 029 280. (Author/DO)

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# SOCIOLINGUISTIC PREMISES AND THE NATURE OF NONSTANDARD DIALECTS

by

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During the last several years the speech of lower socio-economic class Blacks has been of interest to a number of different disciplines, including sociology, psychology, education, speech and hearing, and linguistics. Correspondingly, we have heard varied proclamations about the language behavior of this population. If all current views were complementary, we could be comforted by the thought that we were simply viewing the same phenomenon from several different vantage points. Such is not the case, however. Views from different disciplines and within different disciplines often come into sharp conflict with one another about the speech of lower socio-economic class Blacks. Furthermore, some current views of this variety of English have challenged basic linguistic and sociolinguistic premises about the nature of language. Although it might be convenient to simply ignore some of these views, their current popularity and influence necessitates a more responsible evaluation. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to examine some basic premises about the nature of language which have a direct bearing on current viewpoints of nonstandard dialects in general and the nonstandard dialect spoken by lower socio-economic class Blacks in particular.[1]

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One of the basic premises about the nature of language is that verbal systems are arbitrary, established only by convention.[2] Although one cannot deny a certain degree of consistency in the relation of language to the outside world, relationships between objects and linguistic signs are arbitrary. All languages are equally capable of conceptualization and expressing logical propositions, but the particular mode (i.e. grammar) for conceptualizing may differ drastically between language systems. The linguist, therefore, assumes that different surface forms for expression have nothing to do with the underlying logic of a sentence. There is nothing inherent in a given language variety which will interfere with the development of conceptualization. This is not to say that differences between the handling of logical operations may never correlate with different social classes; however, on the basis of this premise, it cannot be related to language differences, since all language varieties adequately provide for expression of syllogistic reasoning.

To those familar with the current interest in nonstandard varieties of English, it should be apparent that this assumption does not coincide with the conclusions of some of the current projects in the area. To suggest, for example, that Black English imposes certain cognitive limitations on the logical operations of the speaker and to reject it as "illogical" is not generally taken seriously by linguists. Yet, the work of Bereiter and Englemann proposes such a view.[3] Ultimately, such notions seem to be derived from a prescriptive norm for language usage, although philosophical dictums about the logical nature of certain rules of a language add a ring of authority to such pronouncements.

To illustrate, one of the most cited examples of the inherent logical foundation of standard English is the use of negatives with indefinites. If a person uses a sentence such as John didn't do anything, it is understood negatively, but if a person should use the sentence, John didn't do nothing, it can only be meant as a positive statement since two negatives logically make a positive. In this view, if a person uses the construction in a sentence such as John didn't do nothing because he was so lazy, he is using English in an illogical way. Therefore the sentence does not mean what the speaker thought it meant. The speaker apparently means that John did not work, but by saying John didn't do nothing he affirms that John actually did something. Interpretations of this sort ignore a quite regular rule in Black English (as well as in languages such as Spanish and Italian) which states that when you have a negative sentence with indefinites, you may add a negative element to every indefinite (e.g., We ain't never had no trouble about none of us pullin' out no knife or nothin'). In the underlying structure there is only one negative, which is simply realized on every indefinite.

Essential to understanding the underlying proposition of the above sentence is the distinction between "deep" and "surface" structure in language. Deep structure is basically a system of propositions which interrelate in such a way as to express the meaning of the sentence, while surface structure is realization of these propositions in terms of the particular grammatical devices (e.g. linear ordering, grammatical categories) of the language. The knowledge of language involves the ability to assign deep and surface structures to an infinte range of sentences, to relate these structures appropriately, and to assign

a semantic interpretation and phonetic interpretation to the paired deep and surface structure. The failure to understand this relation is, no doubt, responsible for some of the misinterpretation of non-standard varieties of languages. We see, in the case of Black English multiple negation, that the basis for arguing that it is not logical is found in the mistaken identity of a surface structure for a deep structure. The underlying structure of both the standard English and nonstandard English sentences are similar (i.e. Negative + John + do + Indefinite + thing) but the surface realizations are different

Proclamations about the inadequacy of Black English as a non-standard language variety on logical bases, from a linguistic perspective, can be attributed to a naive disregard for one of the primitive premises about the nature of language. Yet, Bereiter maintains that a difference between the negative patterns of Black English and standard English is an indication that the black ghetto child is "deprived of one of the most powerful logical tools our language provides."[4] Bereiter claims that a Black ghetto child "does not know the word not" since his subjects did not regularly give him the form in negating a sentence such as This is not a book. The assumptions of Bereiter, however, reveal two misconceptions. In the first place, he has confused the inability of the student to give him the word not in a specific elicitation task with the child's unfamiliarity with the lexical item. Labov observes that many of the formal elicitation procedures in the context of a classroom can be quite intimidating to the student and the best defense may be no verbal response at all.[5] Intensive research on the structure of Black English in Washington, D.C. and Detroit clearly indicates that not is an integral part of Black English. Secondly, Bereiter is apparently

unaware that other negative patterns may serve the same purpose as not. Thus, a sentence such as This ain't no book may communicate the same negative pattern as not although the structure of the sentence is different. What is essential is not the occurrence of a particular lexical item, or a specific syntactical pattern, but the realization of a particular type of underlying structure involving negation. Whatever deficiencies in logical operations may or may not exist among black ghetto children, these have nothing to do with language.[6]

A second assumption of the linguist is the adequacy of all languages or dialects as communicative systems. It is accepted as a given, that language is a human phenomenon which characterizes every social group, and that all language systems are perfectly adequate as communicative systems for the members of the social group. The social acceptability of a particular language variety (considered the nonstandard variety because it is associated with a subordinate social group) is totally unrelated to its adequacy for communication. The question concerning different language varieties is not the WHAT but the HOW of communication. Thus, the consideration of the so-called disadvantaged child as "non-verbal", "verbally destitute", or at best, "drastically deficient" in his speech is diametically opposed to this basic assumption. That there are typical situations in which young children do not respond because of the uncomfortableness of the social situation, or as a protective dev. ce against middle class meddling, should not be interpreted as meaning that the child lives in a verbally destitute environment, or even that the child does not emphasize the importance of verbal manipulation. For example, the staff of the Sociolinguistics Program at the Center for Applied Linguistics recently conducted interviews with 45 Puerto Rican and Negro boys from Harlem, ranging in age from 13-17. The school records

of the boys in English would no doubt indicate that their writing and oral expression are far below the middle class standard. But consider their responses on a sentence completion drill designed to get at certain indigenous cultural values. As part of this drill they were asked to complete the sentence with what they considered the most appropriate reply -- not in terms school expectation, but with a culturally appropriate solution. Thus, given the sentence "If you wanna be hip with the girls, you gotta "_____, the vast majority of the respondents replied without hesitation,"you gotta rap to her,"or "you gotta have a good rap." Rapping, in Black ghetto culture, refers to a distinctively fluent and lively way of talking, characterized by a high degree of personal style.[7] Linguists therefore assume that the label "verbal destitution" cannot refer to vernacular language patterns, but only to non-indigenous social situations which create such an impression.

The question of adequacy of nonstandard dialects as communicative systems brings out a very important matter on how one views a nonstandard language variety. In actuality, it is much broader than the linguistic situation, reverting back to the basic approach to different social groups. One can, for example, view black ghetto culture and language in terms of two basic models, which Baratz has called a deficit model or a difference model.[8] A deficit model treats speech differences in terms of a norm and deviation from that norm, the norm being middle class white behavior. From a sociological perspective, this means that much of black ghetto behavior, such as matrifocal homes, is viewed as a pathology. In terms of speech behavior, Black English is considered, in the words of Hurst, "the pathology of non-organic speech deficiencies".[9] On the other hand, a difference model, which seems to be much more common

to anthropology than sociology and psychology, considers socially subordinate societies and language varieties as self-contained systems, inherently neither deficient nor superior.

Although this dichotomy between a deficit and difference model may be somewhat oversimplified, it sets a helpful framework for theoretical approaches to nonstandard dialects. But there is also a practical importance for such a distinction. If, for example, one simply considers nonstandard dialects to be corrupt approximations of standard English, one may miss important structural facts about the nature of these dialects. For example, consider the following interpretation of the finite use of the form be, a commonly cited feature of Black English. Ruth Golden, who views Black English in terms of a descending scale of deviation from standard English states:

> Individuals use different levels of language for different situations. These levels vary from the illiterate to the formal and literary. For instance, starting with the illiterate, He don't be here, we might progress to the colloquial, He ain't here, to the general and informal He isn't here up to the formal and literary, He is not present.[10]

From the perspective of a deficit model, be, is simply considered a corrupt approximation of standard English. The possibility that be may have a grammatically different function is precluded. Instead, it is only considered as a "substitution" for the finite forms of standard English am, is and are. The linguist however, looks at this use of be descriptively; that is, he asks what the grammatical function of this form is regardless of its social consequences. When such an

approach is taken, we find that the form be represents a grammatical category which seems to be unique to Black English. This, of course, is not to say that all linguists will accept a given descriptive analysis of this form although a number of analyses agree that it is used to represent an habitual action of some type.[11] This type of disagreement is no more serious than the disagreements that linguists may have over the function of the have auxiliary in standard English. Common to each description of be, however, is the rigorous method of linguistic analysis and the assumption that this form has a linguistic function in its own right. The insistence of language varieties as systems in their own right (with both similarities and differences to related varieties) is the reason that linguists look with suspicion when they see such terms as "substitutions", "replacements", "omissions", "deviations", etc. Such terms used with reference to nonstandard language varieties imply a value judgement about a given variety's relation to the standard variety. Terms like "correspondence" and "alternation" do not have these same implications -- they are statements of fact about language relations. While the terminology may seem to be a trivial matter for the linguist to pick on, the association of such terms with the deficit type of approach raises a danger signal to the linguist. To take the position that nonstandard constructions are simply inaccurate and unworthy approximations of standard English can only lead to an inaccurate descriptions of what is assumed to be a self-contained system, which is perfectly adequate for communication.

In terms of sociolinguistic situations, it is quite common for a socially dominant culture to view a socially subordinate one as having an inadequate means of communication. This view is a common manifestation of linguistic ethnocentrism of the dominant classes. Thus, Spanish-

speaking South Americans often consider the Indian peasants to have no valid language system- - verbally destitute. The current treatment of nonstandard English varieties no different, although it may be more subtle because Americans have sometimes denied the sociological facts concerning the subordinate role of some segments of the population in American society.

Our previous point concerning the adequacy of nonstandard varieties of English as a system of communication naturally leads us to our next premise concerning language, namely, that it is systematic and ordered. Any view of language differences which treats them as unsystematic and irregular will thus be categorically rejected by the linguist. It is assumed that descriptive data of related languages will always reveal regular and systematic correspondences between different types of constructions. One can readily see, then, why the linguist reacts negatively to a view of nonstandard language as that offerred by Hurst, who subsumes differences between Black English and standard English under the rubric "dialectolalia":

> ...dialectolalia involves such specific oral abberations as phonemic and subphonemic replacements, segmental phonemes, phonetic distortion, defective syntax, misarticulations, mispronunciations, limited or poor vocabulary, and faulty phonology. These variables exist most commonly in unsystematic, multifarious combinations.[12]

The above position unambiguously treats Black English as an irregular, unsystematic and faulty rather than a different but equal system. Furthermore, such a position can only be taken when actual descriptive and sociolinguistic facts are ignored, for the linguist

would claim that all evidence points to differences between standard English and Black English which are systematic and regular. Take, for example, the case of word-final consonant clusters in such words as test, ground, and cold. In Black English, the final consonant is regularly absent, the result of a systematic correspondence of a single consonant in Black English where a cluster is found in standard English. Thus, we get tes', groun', and col' in Black English. But these final consonants are not absent randomly or unsystematically. We observe that the correspondence of a single consonant for a word-final cluster only occurs when both members of a potential cluster are either voiced or voiceless, such as st, nd, sk, and ld. But when one of the members is voiced and the other voiceless, as in the clusters mp (jump), lt (colt) and nt (count), this correspondence does not occur.[13] Instead, Black English is like standard English in that both members of the cluster are present. Tho view that differences between related language varieties are random and haphazard is dangerous not only because it conflicts with a linguistic assumption but also from a practical viewpoint. It can lead to an unsystematic approach in teaching standard English and the teaching of points that may be irrelevant in terms of the systematic differences between the two language varieties.

As a final premise of the linguist, we must observe that language is learned in the context of the community. Linguists generally agree that children have a fairly complete language system by the age of 5 or 6, with minor adjustments in language competence occurring sometimes until 8 or 9. This system is acquired from contact with individuals in their environment. Whether this is primarily the parent-

child relationship (which some claim for the middle class white community) or from child peers (which is sometimes claimed for the Black ghetto community) their language is acquired through verbal interaction with individuals in the immediate context. The rate of development is parallel for children of different social groups, lower class children learning the nonstandard dialect at approximately the same rate as middle class children learning the standard variety of English. This assumption of the linguist concerning the rate of language development again comes into basic conflict with basic statements of educational psychologists such as Engelmann, Bereiter and Deutsch, who speak of the communal "language retardation" of ghetto children. Bereiter concludes:

> By the time they are five years old, disadvantaged children of almost every kind are typically one of two years retarded in language development. This is supported by virtually any index of language one cares to look at.[14]

Any linguist will look at such a conclusion with immediate suspicion. Closer investigation of this claim reveals that the fact that these children do not speak standard English is taken to mean that they are linguistically retarded, and, in many cases, that they cognitively deficient. Thus, if a Black lower class child says <u>He nice</u>, a correspondence of the present tense standard English <u>He's nice</u>, it is considered to be an underdeveloped standard English approximation and equivalent to the absence of copula at a particular stage of standard English development.[15] The fact that this form is used by adult speakers is irrelvant, only meaning that adults may have some stabalized form of language retardation. The linguist, however, suggests that Black English is simply one of many languages and dialects, including Russian,

which have a zero copula realization in the present tense. No meaning is lost; an "identity statement" is just as permissible in this dialect as any other language or dialect. This form has no relation to the ability or inability to conceptualize. Similarly, auditory discrimination tests which are designed on a standard English norm are de-facto biased against the nonstandard system. For example, in the auditory discrimination test used by Deutsch, the failure to distinguish wreath from reef or lave from lathe may be considered to be indicative of underdeveloped auditory discrimination since these words are contrastive in standard English.[16] But we observe that such pairs are the result of a systemative pattern in which th and v or f are not distinguished at the end of a word in Black English. Homophony is a widespread and common language phenomenon, and the above homophonous words should cause us no more concern than the homophony of red, the color, and read [rɛd], the past tense of read [rid], or roll, the edible object and role relating to social behavior. What we observe, then, is that the Black English speaker is penalized for the patterned homophony of his dialect, whereas a middle class New Englander is not penalized for the homophony between caught, the past tense of catch and cot, the object for resting, or taught, the past tense of teach, and torte, the pastry. The learning of standard English must be clearly differentiated from language development of an indigeneous dialect. Careful attention should be made, from the viewpoint of linguistic relativism, in order not to erroneously transfer legitimate dialect differences into matters of language acquisition.

The linguist, in support of the linguistic equality of nonstandard dialects, considers evidence on relative language proficiency as that recently provided by Baratz to be an empirical justification for his

claims.[17] Baratz conducted a bidialectal test in which she has compared the proficiency of a group of black ghetto children in repeating standard English and Black English sentences. As might be expected, the black children were considerably more proficient in repeating the Black English sentences. When they repeated the standard English sentences, however, there were predictable differences in their repetitions based on interference from Black English. The same test was then administered to a group of white middle class suburban children, who repeated the standard English sentences quite adequately, but had predictable differences in their repetition of the Black English sentences based on interference from standard English. Which of these groups, then, was linguistically retarded? We must be careful not to confuse social acceptability, and no one would deny the social stigmatization of nonstandard dialects, with language acquisition.

In sum, the relativistic viewpoint of the sociolinguist emphasizes the fully systematic, but different nature of nonstandard dialects. It would be if I had simply slain a dead dragon, but unfortunately, the views with which I have taken issue enjoy current popularity in a number of disciplines. What is more depressing, these views are often communicated to and adopted by those in a position which directly affects the lives of many ghetto children. Furthermore, these views have a direct bearing on the attitude of both white and black middle class teachers toward Black English. The attitudinal problem towards this intricate and unique language system is probably the biggest problem we face. But there is also a practical reason for understanding some linguistic and sociolinguistic premises about the nature of language with reference to nonstandard dialects. An understanding of systematic

differences between nonstandard dialects and standard English must serve as a basis for the most effective teaching of standard English. I am certainly not so naive to suggest that standard English is not a prerequisite for making it in "whitey's world," and the child who desires to do so must be given that option. For the child who chooses this this alternative, we must adopt an attitude and methodology which will take full advantage of what we know about the nature of language systems and language differences.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Several different terms have been used to describe this dialect, including "Black English", "Negro Dialect", and "Negro Non-standard English". Unfortunately, there is no consensus about the use of one term to the exclusion of the others. For a technical description of the features of this dialect, see William Labov, et al., A Study of the Non-Standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City: Phonological and Grammatical Analysis, U.S. Office of Education Project No. 3288 (New York, 1968) or Walter A. Wolfram, A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech (Washington, D.C., 1969). For a non-technical description, see Ralph W. Fasold and Walter A. Wolfram, "Some Pronunciation and Grammatical Features of Negro Dialect" in Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy (eds.), Teaching Standard English in the Inner City (Washington, D.C., in press).

2. Eugene A. Nida, Toward A Science of Translating (Leiden, 1964), p. 46. Nida notes that the arbitrary character of linguistic symbols refers to (1) the arbitrary relationship between the form of the symbol and the form of the referent, (2) the relationships between classes of symbols and classes of referents, and (3) the relationship between classes of symbols and classes of symbols.

3. Carl E. Bereiter and Sigmund E. Engelmann, Teaching Disadvantaged Children in Preschool (Engelwood Cliffs, 1967).

4. Carl E. Bereiter, "Academic Instruction and Preschool Children" in Richard Corbin and Murial Crosby (eds.), Language Programs for the Disadvantaged (Champaign, 1965), p. 199.

5. William Labov, "The Logic of Non-Standard English" in James E. Alatis (ed.) Georgetown University Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics (Washington, D.C., in press).
6. It is interesting to note that a sample of language indices Bereiter pp. 199-200 cites as indicative of language competence have nothing to do with language. He consistently confuses the recognition of logical operations with language development.
7. Thomas Kochman, "Rapping in the Black Ghetto", Trans-Action (February 1969), pp. 26-34.
8. For a discussion, see Joan C. Baratz, "Language in the Economically Disadvantaged Child: A Perspective" ASHA (April 1968), pp. 143-145.
9. Charles G. Hurst, Psychological Correlates in Dialectolalia (Washington, D.C., 1965), p.2.
10. Ruth I. Golden, Effectiveness of Instructional Tapes for Changing Regional Speech", Ed.D. diss., Wayne State University, 1963, p. 173.
11. See, e.g., Walter A. Wolfram, A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech (Washington, D.C., 1969), pp. 188-196.
12. Hurst, p. 2.
13. Wolfram, pp. 50-51.
14. Bereiter, p. 196.
15. See, e.g., Bereiter and Engelmann, pp. 139-140.
16. Cynthia Deutsch, "Auditory Discrimination and Learning Social Factors", Merrill Palmer Quarterly, Vol. X, (1964), pp. 277-296.
17. Joan C. Baratz, "Teaching Reading in a Negro School" in Joan C. Baratz and Roger W. Shuy (eds.), Teaching Black Children to Read (Washington, D.C., 1969), pp. 99-101.